Cities and Citizenship, an Interview with David Harvey

CITIES AND CITIZENSHIP, AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID HARVEY

Interview with David Harvey conducted by Igor Stiks

What, in your opinion, does it mean to be a citizen today? Citizenship is generally related to states, but most of the population of these states live in cities.

Harvey: I would prefer to disaggregate the idea of citizenship. I always felt that wherever I went I sort of carried a notion of citizenship with me no matter where I was and no matter what city I was staying in. I always felt that I was a citizen of that city. And I think actually this is kind of a nice feeling because you feel like you belong anywhere and I think it would be a great idea if cities would declare themselves free zones of citizenship and say, basically, 'anybody who comes to this city is a citizen of this city'. It might be a way of using the kind of Kantian notion of hospitality, saying "While you are here you belong here and you have rights here but also you have responsibilities here". I prefer a more portable notion of citizenship than the ones given by your passport and the territory which you formerly have citizenship of. I think that there are some cities that have declared themselves human rights cities. In France people who are not citizens, such as immigrants, and who can't vote in national elections, can still vote in local elections. I think that's a very good idea. If you've simply been resident in a place for a while then automatically you'll get to vote on what is going on around you and be considered an active participant in the political process. This would help alleviate a lot of problems which exist in many cities now that there's a group of people who are marginalised economically and politically and sometimes, I think, feeling alienated from the space. It creates all kinds of social problems and I suspect that if city administrations declared themselves open to the notion of automatic citizenship of anybody who comes in, an automatic kind of welcome--I'm not talking simply about welcome of affluent tourists--simply saying "Yes, you're part of the fabric of the city and you have rights and obligations that are attached to that".

This enters directly into conflict with state competencies and state monopoly on, not only citizens but also the whole population within its territory. It would be indeed a revolutionary idea. You mention in your lectures these type of actions undertaken by some cities against the logic of the state. These cities are trying to redefine themselves and the legislation that they control in order to allow for more freedoms. How would you assess the successes or failures of these initiatives?

Harvey: One thing by the way that strikes me is that passports were not in general use before the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20thcentury. And at that time people travelled the world and there was an informal way in which they were kind of world citizens. So, I think somehow or other we've got so used to these vast lines going through Heathrow or Kennedy Airport or De Gaulle that we accept the idea that the state has this monopoly on deciding questions of citizenship. It would be good to try and undermine it, but I don't think there is necessarily a conflict at all there, because if somebody's in a country and they go to a city then they've already got into the country. So then the question is what are their rights wherever they are in the country. You could actually formally have states that could actually set up a policy of, say, urban citizenship, automatic urban citizenship for people once they come through. So I don't see there is necessarily a conflict between the two notions of citizenship. In fact I think it would be very helpful for many nation states to have a kind of a dual idea about citizenship and kind of say, "Once we let you through and you have rights to

be in the territory, we've granted you right to come here, then go and enjoy the hospitality of all of these places you are going to".

The modern notion of citizenship, as we understand it from T. H. Marshall onwards, involves these general dimensions of civic, political and, finally, social rights. But, beside these rights, being a political being in any state in the world today, should also include the right to the city as the place where most of citizens' activities take place. Would you agree?

Harvey: Yes, oh, yes. I've been in cities and, you know, joined in demonstrations. I have no problem about that. I don't consider myself an external agitator. I consider myself somebody who is there who wants to participate in political life and why should I be excluded because I have a different passport or something of that kind.

Urban space is a political space par excellence. But it is a place, as you mentioned in many of your works, of exclusion and at the same time a place that has a huge emancipatory potential. How would you define the importance of the urban space in contemporary, modern politics?

Harvey: I think there is a fight to be waged over opening urban space to political activism. We have in New York this horrible thing that you have to apply for a permit and they think about it for three weeks and then they decide whether they will or will not give you a permit. When we wanted to have a big rally in central park, they kind of said "No", because we might disturb the turf in the park. And we said, "Well, how come you let the Pope have a mass in the park but you can't allow this in the park?" There is a question of opening spaces. Even when we are allowed marches in New York City there's this famous thing of *kettling*, such as in London, and we are put between barriers, you can't get out and you're corralled. This seems to me to be a kind of a real political threat. One of the things that is very interesting about cities is the notion of public space. A lot of space in the city actually is part of state control but the public doesn't have access to it at all. So even though it's public, it's not public. So, the use of space of a school for a political rally or something like that, requires all kinds of negotiations, particularly for a political organisation. You have to go through enormous channels to open that space to have a political meeting in a public school. These are the sorts of things where I think there's no public space in the city. There's a lot of public space in the city but public space is never unregulated and so one of the big arenas of contest is to open those public spaces to public uses. Of course the street has always been one of the great open spaces of political activism but increasingly it's been diminished and it diminished a lot of course when the automobile came in for all sorts of obvious reasons. The qualities of public space are very important to look at. One of the issues that social movements are involved in is precisely the question of not only defending public spaces which exist, but actually creating new ones where public events can happen. The struggle over the concept of public space, the regulation of public space is one of the arenas of conflict and struggle over urban life and urban living.

You are touching on an idea that we find in works of feminist theoreticians such as Faranak Miraftab. She has these notions of 'invited spaces of citizenship', such as the spaces for 'kettled demonstrations', and 'invented spaced of citizenship' that are conquered by people themselves, very often on the verge of legality but with a huge legitimacy. What, in your opinion, would be the line to follow to open up more of this spaces?

Harvey: Well, I wouldn't have a sort of a political programme. Almost inevitably at some point or other you're going to come into conflict with some kind of legal restrictions and, at

that point, you have to break through the legal restrictions. If enough people do it then what happens is that usually the authority reacts in a certain way. For instance, in New York with one of the demonstrations they just rounded up people, they cast nets over hundreds of people, and stuck them on a pier for two days without any kind of sanitation or anything. People brought action for illegal arrest and detainment and three years later the city has to pay compensation of some $3million to these people for false arrest and unjustifiable imprisonment. But the city didn't care because by then it had done what it wanted to do, which is to demonstrate to everybody else that they would all be thrown into these situations. So for them it was a kind of cheap way to do it. So, they are also prepared to be illegal. And you have to be prepared to be illegal back. The difference is that when they are illegal they just pay the fine at the end of the day. If you're illegal you suffer from it very significantly but you can't liberate spaces in the city without a struggle and the struggle almost invariably is sometimes over physical barriers and legal barriers. It's always a struggle.

The war that happened in the former Yugoslavia had this dimension of devastation of human space, especially the cities. Most (in)famous was the 4-year long siege of Sarajevo that is the longest recorded siege in modern history. It was in many respects a war against a civilian population which aimed to destroy urban spaces. The famous Belgrade architect Bogdan Bogdanović said that this war cannot be reduced to an ethnic war, but that basically it was a war waged against the city. It was a war, in this interpretation, between rural areas and their conceptions of ethnic purity and the city as a melting pot. How would you react to that?

Harvey: There's been a long history of seeing the city as a cosmopolitan space, which is a serious threat to kind of ethnic national identity. During the Nazi period you found a lot of anti-urban sentiments. There's a long tradition in the United States of anti-urbanism, which is based on an opposition between a kind of rural, Jeffersonian democracy pitted against city machine politics, which are portrayed as being corrupt and evil. The city has always had an imaginary aspect which is both saintly and god-like—such as in the image of the city of god--but also it's Babylon and it's Babel. Against this, we find a kind of imagined rural idyll which is somehow or other authentic and pure, except when you live in those places you find that they're not very authentic and not very pure either. But this is a mythological kind of thing which gets used politically. What has happened in many parts of the world is that the real distinction between the city and countryside, or the urban and the rural, has effectively disappeared. The rural areas are almost totally absorbed into urban life and the rural is essentially a retreat for people to go and spend weekends on the family farm or something like that. The distinction was falling apart and in most societies, and certainly in Britain, there is a rural interest but it's usually about fox hunting or something of that sort rather than an agrarian way of life which is distinctive from the city. I think that distinction has broken down and a lot of the mythology is based on that distinction as it fades away. It's faded away in much of Latin America now, and I imagine in the Balkans it's fading away very fast, if it even existed. I like to use 'the right to the city', because if I put it in formal terms and talk about the right to uneven geographical development nobody would know what I was talking about. Whereas you can draw upon this notion of the relationship between city and citizenship, about the possibility of building something new as well as validating something that's old and that possibility exists in the concept of the city, which is why I like to talk about the right to the city as a political objective. But it's certainly not meant to be at all exclusionary to people who live on the periphery. In fact I like to think about metropolitan regions and bioregions, if you like, with maybe cities centred in bioregions. But again 'the right to the bioregion' doesn't make a great political slogan.